

# Political Interference in Endangered Species Science

## A Systemic Problem at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

United States Department of Interior Deputy Assistant Secretary Julie MacDonald and other Interior Department officials have systematically distorted scientific findings to prevent the protection of a number of highly imperiled species under the Endangered Species Act. The Endangered Species Act requires decisions about species to be made on the best available science. This is one of several case studies, available at [www.ucsusa.org/scientific\\_integrity](http://www.ucsusa.org/scientific_integrity).

### Case: Gunnison's Prairie Dog

The buff-colored Gunnison's prairie dog lives in high desert and mountain grasslands in the four corners area of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado. Its current habitat has been reduced by more than 97% of its historical range, and the onslaught on its home territory has not diminished. Oil and gas drilling, urban sprawl, sylvatic plague, and continued shooting and poisoning of these animals all threaten the species with extinction.

Forest Guardians, in response to a routine Freedom of Information Act request, received several documents that show that, as of January 19, 2006, the Gunnison's prairie dog was on track for a positive 90-day finding—that is, a determination by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service scientists that the species may deserve Endangered Species Act protection based on scientific evidence. But because of explicit orders from Julie MacDonald, a political appointee with no training in biology, the Mountain-Prairie Regional Office of FWS (Region 6) was forced to change their positive finding to a negative one.

#### 1. Julie MacDonald orders reversal of scientists' positive finding

----- Forwarded by Kurt Johnson/ARL/R9/FWS/DOI on 01/19/2006 01:59 PM -----



Chris Nolin/ARL/R9/FWS/DOI

01/19/2006 12:06 PM

To "Kurt Johnson" <kurt\_johnson@fws.gov>  
cc "Marjorie Nelson" <Marjorie\_Nelson@fws.gov>, Adam  
Zerrenner/ARL/R9/FWS/DOI@FWS  
Subject Gunnison pd

Per Julie please make the pd finding negative

Thanks

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Sent from my BlackBerry Wireless Handheld

In the email above, political appointee Chris Nolin relays MacDonald's instructions to reverse the prairie dog finding (abbreviated as pd). Furthermore, MacDonald linked the finding reversal on the white-tailed prairie dog with the decision not to recommend protections for the Gunnison's prairie dog. In the e-mail shown below, MacDonald states, "I need a copy of the rule [Gunnison's prairie dog 90-day finding] asap please. And i would like a copy of the final white-tailed prairie dog rule with it as the issues are exactly the same, habitat and disease."



Julie  
MacDonald/ASFW/OS/DOI@  
DOI

01/22/2006 12:16 AM

To Renne Lohofener/ARL/R9/FWS/DOI@FWS  
cc  
Subject Fw: Gunnison Prairie Dog

I need a copy of the rule asap please. And i would like a copy of the final white-tailed prairie dog rule with it as the issues are exactly the same, habitat and disease.

## 2. Scientists' conclusions rewritten to turn a positive finding into a negative finding

The principal way in which the positive 90-day finding was re-written to be a negative finding was to reverse the scientific conclusion that sylvatic plague is a significant threat to the species.

Compare the original, positive plague finding on p. 31 in Supporting Document #1, an attachment to an email sent 1-19-06:

### Summary of Factor C

We have determined that substantial information is presented in the petition and available in our files to indicate that sylvatic plague may threaten the Gunnison's prairie dog such that listing may be warranted.

...with the edited, negative plague finding on p. 28 in Supporting Document #2, an attachment to an email sent 01-23-06:

### Summary of Factor C

We have determined that information in the petition and readily available in our files does not constitute substantial scientific information that disease or predation are threats to Gunnison's prairie dog such that listing under the Act may be warranted. We recognize that sylvatic plague has been and continues to be a major mortality factor for Gunnison's prairie dog, but the impact that this disease has had on the overall status of the species remains unclear. More information on the impacts of disease, specifically sylvatic plague, with regard to persistence of Gunnison's prairie dog populations is needed.

The new posture taken in the summary of the discussion of disease in the negative finding is that the impact of sylvatic plague on Gunnison's prairie dog is "unclear" and new information is needed. However, no other change was made to the scientific evidence supporting this conclusion, and no new information was provided to explain the change.

### Summary of Factor C

We have determined that information in the petition and readily available in our files does not constitute substantial scientific information that disease or predation are threats to Gunnison's prairie dog such that listing under the Act may be warranted. We recognize that sylvatic plague has been and continues to be the major mortality factor for Gunnison's prairie dog at specific sites, but the impact that this disease has had on the overall status of the species, even at the State level, remains unclear. More information on the impacts of disease, specifically sylvatic plague, with regard to persistence of Gunnison's prairie dog populations is needed.

## 3. The published, negative finding reflects the edits

The final negative finding also characterizes sylvatic plague as an unclear threat (p. 7 of Federal Register Notice, reproduced at right).

*There are five prairie dog species in North America: Gunnison's prairie dogs are located on the Colorado Plateau, where Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado meet. FWS's 90-day finding found that Gunnison's prairie dogs have disappeared from over 97% of their former habitat. Plague, shooting, poisoning, and oil and gas drilling were documented in the petition as threats. The broad coalition supportive of the listing effort includes realtors, homebuilders, religious groups, and military officials. The published negative finding, petition, states' Conservation Assessment, and high-resolution photos are available at: [http://www.fguardians.org/es/issue\\_gunnisons-prairie-dog.asp](http://www.fguardians.org/es/issue_gunnisons-prairie-dog.asp). For more information, contact Nicole Rosmarino with Forest Guardians at 505-988-9126x156 or [nrosmarino@fguardians.org](mailto:nrosmarino@fguardians.org)*